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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [PREL](#) [RS](#) [LG](#)

SUBJECT: POLITICAL PARTY RILES UP SIMMERING ETHNIC TENSION

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Bruce Rogers for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: As the Latvian economy unravels, political parties are drawing on long-simmering ethnic tensions to rally votes prior to local elections in June. The most brazen example is a recent internet video intended to scare voters away from a party aligned with ethnic Russian interests. The upcoming March 16th commemoration of the Latvian Legionnaires who fought for the Nazis in World War II could be a flashpoint for further conflict. The GOL continues to downplay the issue, while expressing concern that Moscow is attempting to exploit tensions to embarrass Latvia or foment discontent among Latvia's ethnic-Russian residents. End Summary.

¶2. (C) As the economy continues to decline and political parties try to spread blame or play on Latvians' free-floating anger and resentment, ethnic tensions have become more pronounced. Examples include attempts to quickly pin blame on ethnic-Russian hooligans for riots in Riga in January, and the GOL's single-minded focus on the description of the stateless Russian-speaking population in the USG Human Rights Report. Animosity between Latvians and ethnic Russians has often been used to rally votes in the past, and it appears that it is once again emerging in the run-up to local elections in June.

¶3. (C) In a new and widely-discussed video clip, right-wing party For Fatherland and Freedom (TB/LNNK) strongly implies that left-leaning and largely ethnic-Russian Harmony Center (SC) hopes to cede Latvia to Russian control. This is a serious escalation of a previously substantive back-and-forth series between the parties. The new video includes graphics of a map of Latvia overtaken by red flags flowing in from the Russian border, and ends with the tagline "What is Harmony Center aiming for?" with a shot of Latvia's freedom monument seen through the crosshairs of a gun sight. Business and government leaders' reactions have been largely negative, and in private meetings with us, even the TB/LNNK Mayor of Riga has backed away from the clip. However, the mainly rural, working-class target audience has been receptive to the anti-Russian message before.

¶4. (C) The next flashpoint for heightened tensions will be March 16, when some Latvians commemorate the service of the Nazi-conscript Latvian Legion in fighting against Soviet occupation. The GOL is quick to point out that the Legionnaires' Day parades are strictly private events. Nonetheless, they have sparked confrontations with anti-Nazi protesters in past years. This year, with economic misery running high, police threatening a brief strike on the day of the event, and foreign anti-Nazi activists promising to come to town to escalate the confrontation, the risk of disturbances is higher. While many groups on both sides have applied for parade or demonstration permits, the City of Riga has not approved any permits yet.

¶5. (C) To his credit, Russian Ambassador Veshnyakov has publicly maintained his calls for ethnic Russians to avoid confrontations on March 16th, though the Russian Embassy

still highlights the event as an example of Latvian intolerance. The Latvians, for their part, are concerned about Russian diplomatic efforts in other capitals to paint Latvia as an oppressor of its ethnic Russian population, and about possible Russian government efforts to stir discontent among ethnic Russians in Latvia.

¶6. (C) Comment: Many, and perhaps most, Latvians regard the TB/LNNK advertisement as a desperate attempt at attention from the smallest member of the government coalition. But there is clearly a significant audience that is receptive to the antagonistic message. It is not a surprise that nationalist parties have attempted to score easy points during a period of political uncertainty by playing on deep-seated resentments. Unfortunately, given the level of economic suffering, they may find a particularly receptive audience that might not need much encouragement to lash out at perceived enemies. Post's efforts to encourage a more integrated and tolerant Latvia will probably be fighting against a strong current in coming months.

ROGERS